SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
INTERVIEW WITH THE SECRETARY IN THE ECONOMIST
APRIL 9, 1994 (INTERVIEW ON APRIL 3, 1994)

THE ECONOMIST Apr. 9, 1994 Pg. 32

Perrypatetic

THE secretary of state listens carefully behind his large, reassuring glasses. He pauses for reflection before speaking. Then, slowly, he proceeds to set out startlingly candid and interesting thoughts on the big issues of the day, from North Korea to Bosnia. It seems American foreign policy has suddenly found a new, articulate voice.

Wait a minute. There is never anything startling about Warren Christopher, except perhaps his ability to nod off in public. He does not wear glasses, either. The man who has started to sound like a secretary of state is in fact the defence secretary, William Perry. He was universally thought to be media-shy and reckoned by many to be a technocrat who was unlikely to make a mark on American grand strategy. Now, two months into his job, he is popping up in public all over the place and moving into the strategy business in a big way.

This can cause problems. When he was merely number two at the Pentagon, Mr Perry did not have to worry too much about the consequences of speaking his thoughts plainly. He has yet to master the diplomat's art of ambiguity. The professional diplomats had to spend a couple of days mopping up after his blunt remark on "Meet the Press" last Sunday that America "will not enter the war" to stop Bosnia's Serbs from taking Gorazde. It sounded like a green light for another bit of ethnic cleansing. The episode, said a State Department official, was "a good reminder that when you don't have a particularly good brief it's better to stay still for a while."

The diplomats may delight in treating Mr Perry as a novice, but they do not seem to mind his encroaching on their territory. They like him (it is hard to find anyone who does not). They are a lot more comfortable with Mr Perry articulating policies than they were with his predecessor, Les Aspin, whom they saw as something of an unguided missile. Mr Perry and Mr Christopher have a good relationship. Mr Christopher may be miserable these days. But the explanation is not Mr Perry.

For the secretary of state, access to the president is still a problem. After his recent, ill-starred trip to China he did not see Mr Clinton. As long ago as last autumn Mr Clinton was being urged to set aside a weekly session on foreign policy, to avoid dangerous neglect. The sessions are now supposed to be happening—one week with a narrow group (the president, Mr Christopher, Mr Perry, the national security adviser, Anthony Lake, and the White House chief of staff, Mack McLarty), the next week with a wider group. But the meetings began only a couple of months ago, and have not even been happening regularly.

Mr Perry's access is no better than Mr Christopher's (he admitted last Sunday that it had been "several weeks" since he had had a private conversation with the president). But between an under-impressive and unhappy Mr Christopher, a barely visible Mr Lake and a home-policy-fixated Mr Clinton, there is ample room for a forceful foreign-affairs advocate to stand out. Mr Perry is proving, in his quiet way, to be unexpectedly forceful. Not only is he in confident command at the Pentagon, where clear guidance from the top is a welcome change. An admirer there calls him a "deeply centred individual" who inspires respect for his decency, steadiness and his performance at meetings (Mr Perry is not quick to open his mouth, "but his is the opinion people tend to remember"). He is also spreading his wings on policy matters. The question now is not the size of his policy input, but its quality.

His early grades are mixed. That clumsy foot-sticking into Bosnia merits a disappointing gamma. He has done better on North Korea, spelling out with admirable frankness the danger ahead: the possibility of a wacky country making a dozen or more nuclear bombs a year, ready to flog them in the Middle East or use them to try to dictate Korean unification on the North's own terms. "Whatever dangers there are in standing up to [the North Koreans] now, those dangers are going to be compounded two or three years from now." Splendid.

But he then spoilt things by being equally frank about what America was not prepared to do to stand up to North Korea now: launch a military strike, an idea Mr Perry rejects because it could provoke a winnable but bloody war. That makes a nice 82nd birthday present for Kim Il Sung, North Korea's dictator. Mr Perry has a chance to send a tougher message when he visits the Korean peninsula next week. Meanwhile, beta at best.

Alpha, though, on Russia. Here is some necessary and belated realism. Even if everything goes splendidly, "the new Russia will have interests different from our interests." The best outcome is possible, but the worst—an "authoritarian, imperialistic nation hostile to the West"—must be prepared for.

Preventing a drift back to a cold war is one of the three objectives Mr Perry set himself on becoming defence secretary. He also aims to manage the draw-down of defence resources without the disasters that flowed from the draw-downs after 1918 and 1945. Hardest of all, he is trying to "reformulate a policy for the use and the threat of use of military power" in post-cold-war conflicts.

That is where the Perryscope shows both promise and pitfalls. Promise, because Mr Perry brings a good mind to knotty issues. Pitfalls, because he is in danger of spelling out with crystal clarity the weakness of the world's superpower, as it looks inwards and cuts its forces. So far, the new secretary of state (sorry, defence) has been over-frank about what America cannot do—in Somalia, over North Korea, in Gorazde—and under-illuminating about what it can do.